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THE STORY OF BENGALEE LITERATURE.

(Paper read at the Summer Meeting at Darjeeling
on the 14th of June 1917).

BY
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The Story of Bengalee Literature.

All that is possible for me to do, within the time at my disposal, is to tell you shortly the story of Bengalee literature. As you all know, the art of telling a short story is a difficult one. The difficulty lies in keeping out a mass of interesting details and at the same time keeping up the interest of the story. So what I propose to do is to give a sort of pen-and-ink sketch of the history of our literature, composed of many blank spaces and a few detached lines. This history is a sealed book to most of you, so my sketch, however meagre and colourless it may be, is likely to have at least the interest of novelty about it.

I ought to tell you at the very beginning, that as yet we do not know the full history either of our language or of our literature. Scholarly research in this field of literature has just begun, and we are still engaged in manuscript-hunting. In the present state of our knowledge, any history of our literature that we may construct, must be of a tentative and incomplete nature. So I have considered it safer for the present to stick to matters of common knowledge, and steer clear of all controversial topics. In the light of fresh knowledge, we may have to revise many of our facts, but certainly not our estimates. We may

not know all about our literature, but we know the literature itself,—and that is sufficient for my present purpose.

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Bengalee literature was born in Mahomedan India. The reason for this, to my mind, is not far to seek. Along with the Hindu Kings,—Sanskrit, the universal literary language of ancient India, came to be dethroned. And it was under the new political régime that the people of Bengal, for the first time in their history, got the chance of speaking out their own mind in their own tongue.

But the character of this new literature belies its birth, because it is an essentially Hindu literature. All its themes, ideas and sentiments are intimately connected with the Hindu religion and Hindu mythology, Hindu civilisation and Hindu culture. Chronologically it belongs to Mahomedan India, but spiritually it belongs to Hindu India. It is an incontestable fact, that Bengalee literature marks a new stage in the evolution of the Hindu spirit. The character of this evolution was undoubtedly determined, to a certain extent, by the changed political circumstances of the country ; but what influence, if any, Islam had on it, remains as yet a matter of speculation. Whatever influence Mahomedan religious and social ideals had on the Hindu mind, was of an indirect nature. That Bengalee literature is popular in its origin, and is largely democratic in its ideas and sentiments, is very likely due to the Hindu mind's coming into contact with Islam. But no thought of Mahomedan

origin found its way into Bengalee literature, until it had been completely transformed and Hinduised,—and that also by a sub-conscious process. The remarkable fact about the Bengalee literature of pre-British days is, that it does not show any trace of any conscious adoption or even adaptation of foreign ways of thinking and feeling. The strangeness of this fact will be apparent to you all, when I come to deal with our modern literature.

Our first poet Chandidas was a contemporary of Chaucer. That Bengalee and English literature should have been born at the same time, is one of those strange historical coincidences, whose mystery astronomers try to solve by reference to the periodical appearance of sun-spots. But barring the fact that they were contemporaries, there is nothing in common either in their lives, or in their works, between these two poets. Chaucer was a highly-cultured and much-travelled gentleman, and a courtier to boot. Chandidas, on the other hand, was a poor village priest, who for aught we know to the contrary, never went either in body or mind, beyond the confines of his native village. Whereas Chaucer paints the men and manners of his time, Chandidas sings out his personal emotions; in a word, Chandidas' poetry is as subjective as Chaucer's is objective.

Our first poet also happens to be one of our greatest. As a matter of fact, between him and Rabindra Nath Tagore, there is no other lyric poet who can be placed in the same rank with him.

The most remarkable thing about his poetry is, that it is perfect in expression. There is nothing crude or experimental, nothing loose or vague about it. In it the Bengalee language became fully articulate, and Indian literature had a new birth. By the simplicity and directness of his speech, by the sincerity and intimacy of his feeling, he brought into existence a new literature—far removed from the spirit and temper of our classical literature. The personal note, which is altogether absent from Sanskrit literature, was heard for the first time in Chandidas' lyrics, in all its clearness and fullness.

I ought to tell you here, that his poems are not lyrics, in the modern European sense of the word. They cannot be classed with Milton's *Lycidas*, Shelley's *Epipsychidion*, or Swinburne's *Triumph of Time*. The Bengalee poet composed real songs, and he expressed such sentiments and used such words only as could be made to fit naturally into the folk-melodies of Bengal. For this reason there is a freshness and charm about them, which we miss in the more ambitious literary productions of a cultured age. Chandidas sings of love—and nothing but love. Its concrete joys and sorrows, its yearnings and delusions, the raptures of union and the pangs of separation, are the entire stock-in-trade of his poetry. To use his own language, the disease called love took possession of his soul in his boyhood, and he suffered from repeated relapses all through his life. His genius lay in giving such fervent and at the same time such exquisite expression to his

heart-troubles, that his lyrics have become, for us Bengalees at least, things of beauty and a joy for ever.

Before I take leave of Chandidas, I should like to tell you, that though his poetry is personal in the most intimate sense of the word, it is not personal in form. Evidently, in those days it was considered bad form for a poet to speak in the first person singular. The conventional thing was to describe the ideal love of Radha and Krishna, the story of whose amorous sports on the banks of the river Jamuna has been the favourite theme of successive generations of Indian poets. Chandidas also adopted this convention, but there is nothing conventional about the sentiments he expresses, and his works bear such a strong and unmistakable impress of the poet's individuality and personality, that they clearly stand apart from the anonymous folk-songs of India.

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After Chandidas, the poetic genius of Bengal, having lain dormant for about a century, suddenly burst forth into a superb and superabundant crop of songs and lyrics. What shook the people of Bengal out of their spiritual slumber, was the revival of the Vaishnav cult, inaugurated by Chaitanya, the greatest religious reformer Bengal ever produced. Vaishnavism is the oldest monotheistic creed of India, and with its doctrines of a personal God and incarnation, salvation by faith and divine grace, it bears a close resemblance to Christianity. After the fall of Buddhism, this religion was

revived throughout the length and breadth of India, and has now come to occupy the position of the dominant creed of our country. Chaitanya's revivalist movement had a double aspect,—destructive as well as constructive. In its negative aspect, it represented on the one hand the revolt against the dry intellectualism and mechanical ritualism of orthodox Brahminism, and on the other the revolt against the gross and immoral rites of popular creeds. In its positive aspect, it represented the lyrical cry of the human soul for the divine. The God of this new religion, was neither a metaphysical entity nor an inhuman deity, but the second person of the trinity, all love and goodness, a concrete and individual over-soul, with whom the human soul could come into direct and intimate communion—and that through faith, which to us means disinterested and uttermost love. Bengalee Vaishnavism, in its anxiety to preserve the personality of God, went so far as to endow him with a spiritual, not a physical body—but a body all the same; and thereby made him almost tangible. It is recorded of Chaitanya, who was the most erudite and brilliant scholar of his age, that on the day he awoke to spiritual life, he tied up his Sanskrit manuscripts, never to open them again. This act is symbolic of the whole movement. Chaitanya was a contemporary of the founder of Protestantism, but he had much more in common with St. Francis than with Martin Luther. Chaitanya deliberately turned his back on the intellectual and practical activities of man. Neo-Vaishnavism, if I may so call it,

being divorced from metaphysics, became wedded to æsthetics, and all its appeal was to the emotional nature of man.

You can well imagine how such a religion stimulated the poetic soul of the nation. Chaitanya's doctrine of spiritual liberty, equality, and fraternity, could not but set free a quantity of spiritual energy in the heart of the people. As a romantic spiritual movement, which set a new and supreme value on human emotions, it caused a simultaneous deepening and heightening of the emotional nature of the people. And it is no wonder that the Bengalees of that age experienced an urgent need of giving expression to their insurgent and resurgent feelings. The votaries of this new cult, found in Chandidas' poetry a ready-made mould, into which they could easily pour their new-born emotions.

The poets of this age played upon the whole gamut of what we call tender emotions. But sex love, as the intensest and the most insistent of all human passions, was considered the culminating flower of the human spirit. Naturally, in Neo-Vaishnavism, sex-love soon became the symbol of the love of the human for the divine soul, and gradually these two passions came to be identified as being fundamentally one and the same spiritual activity. The sublimation of the sensual into the spiritual, is a common and dominant trait of all romantic literature, and we know that in the hands of Christian mystics, the relation between

Christ and the Church very often assumed too human a character. In Bengal this process of identification was an easy one, as our poets sang only the love-story of the divine Krishna and the human Radha, which might be taken as symbolic of the communion of the human soul with the divine. In the result, some of the finest lyrics in our language came from the hands of these Neo-Vaishnav poets. The very best amongst them have a passion and warmth, an intensity and fervour, which were denied to the muse of Chandidas. Others have acquired a strange beauty from the mingling of the divine and the human, and the love they treat of seems to have a divine odour, a spiritual flavour and a mystic tinge about it. But we also detect in this latter-day poetry, signs of unmistakable decadence. It is, as a rule, characterised by something that is either over-strained in feeling, or over-emphasised in expression; emotionalism, by its very excesses, died a natural death, as it were through sheer nervous exhaustion. When this revivalist movement settled down into a new orthodoxy, it lost much of its inspiring character, and the Neo-Vaishnav poetry degenerated into conventional literature; that is to say, the latter-day poets began simulating the feelings and repeating the phrases of their predecessors. A purely romantic movement in literature cannot have a very long life, especially amongst a people who have come to the inheritance of Indo-Aryan civilisation, whose fundamental doctrine is, that emotion is a thing not to be expressed, but suppressed. The custodians of

Sanskrit literature in Bengal, those whose minds had been hardened by the philosophic and practical disciplines of Vedic culture, had but imperfect sympathies with this sentimental cult, and what we call lyrical was frankly condemned by them as hysterical. There is a class of people even now, who are for recovering our lost medieval soul, and remodelling our new poetry on the old. They forget that history does not repeat itself, either in life or in literature, and if we tried to write poetry after the manner of the Neo-Vaishnav poets, we should only succeed in copying their mannerisms. We have a new psychology, with a wider range of emotions, which can find utterance only in new poetry.

The abiding charm of Vaishnav poetry lies in the fact, that it expresses the ardent joys and the sweet sorrows of life, and creates a longing for and holds out a hope of their infinite prolongation in eternal life. But it would be great mistake to suppose that our poets only dealt with the softer emotions of the human heart. There is a class of lyrics which reflects a sterner and gloomier side of the national soul,—I refer to Shakta poetry. Shaktism is also an ancient Indian cult. Quite early in the history of India, the destructive principle in nature had been personified into a goddess of terrible aspect, adorned with skulls, and armed with a sword, eternally dancing a cosmic war-dance. This cult had a strong hold over the minds of a certain class of Bengalees, especially those belonging to the higher castes. Vaishnavism arose as a

protest against the cruel and superstitious rites of this creed. Chaitanya's humanitarian movement undoubtedly succeeded in purging Bengal of the grosser elements of Shakta worship, but it could not kill the feeling that lay behind the worship of Shakti. Nature in Bengal is not always benign,—she has also her angry moods. Ours is the land of earthquakes and cyclones, of devastating floods and tidal waves. We live face to face with the destructive forces of nature, and it is impossible for us to ignore her terrible aspect. Shakta poetry represents the lyrical cry of the human soul in presence of all that is tremendous and death-dealing in the universe. There is such a feeling as the rapturous adoration of the mysterious energy which creates life only to destroy it. We in Bengal see before our very eyes, the process of boundless creation going on simultaneously with reckless destruction. So the goddess Shakti became for us the divine mother who devours her own children. The Bengalee mind, however, humanised the motherhood of Shakti, and the greatest of our Shakta poets,—Ramprosad—sang of her loving kindness in such simple and deep tones, that his songs are amongst the most popular in Bengal. This Shakta poetry represents the very antithesis of the Vaishnav. The contrast between the two is well exemplified by the respective emblems of these two sects, the red flower and the white. The songs of Bengal show that what we now-a-days call the soul of a nation, is made up of irreconcilable contradictions, and which side of it at a particular moment will

blossom forth in literature, is determined by causes other than literary.

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All poetry falls naturally into two classes, the lyric and the narrative ; because man's feelings and actions are the material on which the poet works. Bengal also produced both. The reason why I have dwelt at some length on the lyric poetry of Bengal is, that our literature cannot show anything better, and in delicacy and depth of feeling the lyrics of Bengal are equal to the best in any other literature. But our narrative poetry never attained a high excellence. The cause of this inferiority should be sought for in our social life. Narrative poetry suffered from the want of proper material. Social life in Bengal lacked that richness and variety, that stir and movement, in a word, that dramatic element, which is the very stuff out of which immortal stories are made. So when a Bengalee poet wanted to tell a story, he had to borrow his subject from other peoples or other ages. The best specimens we have of this class of literature, are the translations of the two great Sanskrit epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Krittibasa, the author of the Bengalee version of the Ramayana, was almost a contemporary of Chandidas. So the lyric and the narrative were born at about the same time.

We know how and under what circumstances the latter came into existence. The Hindu epics were translated, at the instance of and under the

patronage of the Pathan rulers of Bengal. It is a curious fact that our Mahomedan rulers should have been instrumental in spreading and strengthening the hold of Brahminism in Bengal. We know that Bengal had a Buddhistic period, which came to an end on the eve of the Mahomedan conquest of our country. In course of time, Rama the hero of the Ramayana, and Krishna the hero of the Mahabharata, had come to be recognised as the incarnations of Vishnu. So these translations helped to mould the religious psychology of the people, in the same manner as the translations of the Bible into popular tongues did in Europe.

There is no question that the Ramayana is the finest romance, and the Mahabharata the greatest drama in all Indian literature. But these epics lost much of their grandeur and strength, their beauty and dignity, in being done into Bengalee. Neither Krittibasa nor Kashidasa, the author of the Bengalee Mahabharata, lived in a heroic age ; and it is no wonder that they failed to preserve in their works, the virility and sublimity of the original. But the pity of it is, that in rendering the epic characters into Bengalee, they should have softened their moral features beyond recognition. In the Bengalee version, the sentimental element, as a rule, gets the better of the moral. For example, in the extant edition of Krittibasa's Rāmāyana, we find that the fierce demons of Lanka, the incarnations of all that is violent and brutal in human nature, have become transformed into

Neo-Vaishnavs, who never let slip an opportunity of shedding sentimental tears on the battlefield. It is as strange a conversion as would be that of the German army into a Salvation army! The literary worth of these two Bengalee epic poems is not much, but their educational value has been immense. In spite of all their literary shortcomings, they are the two sanest and healthiest books in our literature. The stories are too great to be spoiled, even by weak translation.

We also have a few indigenous epics in Bengalee literature. I call these narrative poems epics, because they have rather a national than an individual character about them. Somebody has described architecture as an art, which is not one-man deep, but a thousand-men deep. There exists the same difference between an ordinary narrative and an epic, as there is between sculpture and architecture.

All national epics have their origin in international conflicts, and the Bengalee epics are no exception to this rule. These stories have evidently been built up out of popular legends, and are reminiscent of an early period of our history, when there was a battle of rival creeds in Bengal, and the local gods and goddesses fought for supremacy with the Trinity of Brahminic faith, which the early Aryan immigrants to Bengal had brought with them. There are two distinct cycles of these legends, one connected with the worship of Chandi, another with that of Manasha, both of whom in

course of time had succeeded in insinuating themselves into the ample and hospitable bosom of the Hindu pantheon. These stories turn on the wrath of these goddesses against those who refused to bow down their heads before them, and the tale is the tale of woe which befell them on account of their intransigence. The victims, as a rule, are merchant princes, votaries of the much nobler and philosophic Shaiva cult, who heroically bore all the calamities which befell them, rather than worship these popular deities, who were, as one of them remarks, as ill-favoured as they were malevolent. Although these stories have all the elements of a Greek tragedy about them, in the hands of Bengalee poets they have become humdrum and prosaic narratives. The object of these poets was, not to create literature, but to impress their audience with the superhuman power of these deities, and the inhuman manner in which they exercised them ; so naturally these narratives could not take a high rank as literature.

These poems form the real folk-literature of Bengal, and as such, are characterised by all its artlessness and naïveté. All the same, they have a peculiar interest for us. In them we find a graphic description of the Bengalee life and Bengalee mind of a bygone age. These village poets paint the picture of contemporary life, in that rough and realistic manner which is so dear to the heart of the people : and what redeems this literature from dullness and banalité, is its humour, half-satirical

and half-playful, a humour which never degenerates into positive grossness or prurience. This fact is all the more strange, as in India reticence was never recognised as a literary virtue, until the advent of the British. This idyllic picture of a quiet and easeful rural life, makes us modern men sigh for those good old times. And it is no wonder that the more imaginative amongst us, have idealised this picture into that of an earthly paradise of absolute peace and plenty. And very recently the cry of "go back to the land" has been raised in politico-literary circles. The desire to escape from the storm and stress of modern life into a secure haven of perpetual rest, is a very natural one. But I am afraid we cannot retrace our steps, either socially or psychologically. And then it is too early for a young nation like us to think of retiring on pension ! We had better not forget one fact about our past life, which all these poems bring out so prominently,—and that is, that the Bengalees in those days were a sea-faring people. All the romance of this literature is connected with sea-voyages. What a wide horizon this fact opens out to our historic imagination, and what a new light it throws on our past national life !

You have seen that the whole of our poetic literature was intimately connected with religion, and thereby had assumed not only a semi-religious, but almost a sectarian character.

But there is one striking exception to this rule. There is a unique book, the *Vidya Sunder of Bharat*

Chandra,—unique both in its merits and its faults,—which marks the birth of the secular spirit in our literature. I have already said that an epic poem partakes of the character of architecture ;—what Bharat Chandra has given us, is a piece of literary sculpture. The *Vidya Sunder* is a love-story, a novel in verse. And the love he treats of has nothing spiritual or ideal about it, but is the common mundane passion which lends itself to humorous and even indelicate treatment. To Bharat Chandra, love is an amusing episode in a man's life, and he has not failed to draw all the fun he could out of his subject. Bharat Chandra's poem, if I may say so, is a study in nude,—not of *Psyche*, but of *Venus Pandemos*. He has not forgotten to give the conventional mythological frame to his picture. But he handles the gods and goddesses with such dexterous irreverence, that in his hands the sacred drama of the Hindu pantheon degenerates into a secular comedy. The son of a Rajah himself, and the Court-poet of another Rajah, Krishna Chandra,—one of the principal actors in the drama of Plassey,—he embodies in his works all the outer elegance and all the inner corruption of a decadent aristocratic society. Gay and frivolous, cultured and cynical, witty and perverse, Bharat Chandra represents the utterly secular spirit of eighteenth-century poetry. However paradoxical it may sound, there is no gainsaying the fact that he had a typical Latin soul, and there is nothing indefinite or inchoate, shadowy or mystical about his poetry,—which is as brilliant, as it is transparent.

Bharat Chandra's reputation is under a cloud now. The English-educated community have no stomach for a literature which is neither clean nor healthy. A subtle and persistent odour of decaying morals and dying faith pervades the whole poem, which makes the modern reader feel uncomfortably squeamish. I have no hesitation in admitting that Bharat Chandra's masterpiece is a *fleur de mal*, but it is a flower all the same, many-petalled and of perfect form. In the whole field of ancient Bengalee literature, there is nothing which can be compared to it as a work of art. With the solitary exception of Rabindranath Tagore, no Bengalee poet has ever shown such mastery over verse-forms. In sheer technical skill, I doubt if he has any superior, even amongst the Neo-Parnassian poets of France. I know the modern mind has a prejudice against technique. It is considered as something artificial and mechanical, but that is because the modern mind does not appreciate the abiding value of conscientious work. The time-spirit of this age is in such a tremendous hurry to get on, that it has no leisure to create or appreciate anything permanent. As regards Bharat Chandra's language, there is nothing more limpid, more bright, more graceful or more elegant in the whole range of Bengalee literature. Our people did not know what a plastic material they had in their own language, till Bharat Chandra moulded it into shapes of perfect-beauty, so firm in outline, so symmetrical in structure. Bharat Chandra, as a supreme literary craftsman, will ever remain a master to us writers

of the Bengalee language. He was not only the finest artist, but the keenest intellect of the Bengalee literature of pre-British days. He knew the world and its affairs, as no predecessor of his ever did. He paints a harrowing picture of the limitless anarchy of his time, which proclaims loudly that the old order must change, giving place to the new, if the Bengalee people were to live and grow. In a lyric of rare beauty and sincerity, Bharat Chandra addressing his God says, that the game you play every day is not good for every day, so play something new after my heart. His prayer was heard, and within a year of the poet's death, the battle of Plassey was fought and won by the English.

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The English brought prose into Bengal, and when rhyme gave place to reason, our literature entered into its modern phase.

The latter half of the eighteenth century is a blank page in the history of our literature. Evidently, during this period our people were too much occupied with adjusting their lives to the new political conditions, to have any leisure to read or write, and it is just possible that they were in no mood either, for singing songs and telling stories.

The opening years of the nineteenth century saw the birth of a new literature, because by that time the country had got a settled government, and a new generation had come into existence.

This new literature did not grow out of the old. Both in matter and manner it was so novel, that it represented not an evolution, but a transmutation, as it were, of the national psychology.

In English literature our people discovered a new mental hemisphere, a new world of knowledge, the knowledge of the facts of this world and this life,—and a dormant faculty of our soul awoke into new life. What the German philosophers call the “will to know”, suddenly manifested itself amongst our people, in all its freshness and vigour. Bengal at this period showed too exclusive a desire to acquire and spread what is called useful knowledge. Naturally it was an age of text-books and translations. Englishmen wrote books for the benefit of Bengalees, and Bengalees wrote books for the benefit of Englishmen, and it seems everybody was anxious to teach everybody else something or other. What knowledge those Bengalee books contained, and how useful it proved to the community at large, is a matter about which history is silent. This early crop of modern Bengalee literature has entirely disappeared, without leaving any tangible fruit behind. The earliest printed book I know of, *Probodh Chandrika*, is one of the curiosities of our literature. The author, a Brahmin Pundit, says in his introduction that he had composed the book in order to give a little education to young English gentlemen. What education they derived from this book, has always been a mystery to me. The book is divided into two parts. The first part is a

jumble of logic and grammar, philosophy and philology, written in an unintelligible jargon composed of $\frac{3}{4}$ th Sanskrit and $\frac{1}{4}$ th Bengalee. The second consists of folk-tales and animal stories, written in the raciest vernacular. In the telling of these stories, the learned author gives free vent to what the French call *l'esprit gaulois*. So far as I know, this is the only book in Bengalee literature, which contains a genuine sample of Rabelaisian humour. Never before or after, have didactic stories been written in our language in such an outrageously gross manner. I believe this book has survived, because it has a definite savour about it ; the lost ones must have been absolutely tasteless. So far as translations are concerned, it does not appear from their extant specimens, that they were done according to any definite plan or method. I have seen translations of Bacon's essays and of Uncle Tom's Cabin, of the Comedy of Errors, and of Rasselas. This last book has been rendered into such Johnsonian Bengalee, that it would have made the heart of Dr. Johnson glad to read it ! There is nothing surprising about all this. It was the experimental age of our literature. The new writers made experiments with language as with literature. They not only wrote booklets on geography and zoology, but also dramas and stories.

From amongst this mass of experimental literature, one book stands out as an unique product of the Bengalee genius. Its author, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, had made many experiments in life and

literature. In his youth, he became a convert to Christianity, married an Englishwoman, and wrote English poetry. The first generation of English-educated Bengalees all wrote English, because they had deluded themselves into the belief that they could do so. We also write English, but labour under no such delusion. Michael was one of the very first to realise, that a Bengalee could create literature only in Bengalee, and no other language. So after having tried his hand at every form of English poetry and failed, he sat down to write an epic in Bengalee, after the manner of Milton. This is one of the boldest experiments that has ever been made in any literature, and strange to say, he performed the miracle. It is impossible to bring out the deep-toned music of *Paradise Lost* from our thin-voiced language. Michael knew perfectly well, that however violently he might torture the Bengalee vina, it would never yield the notes of a church-organ. So this audacious poet deliberately invented a language of his own, rich in assonance and consonance, which could be put into Miltonic blank-verse. He had followed the advice of Theophile Gautier to aspiring poets, long before the French poet gave it. He studied the dictionary, and drew his vocabulary from it. Our people consider his work to be a masterpiece of Bengalee literature. It is undoubtedly a masterpiece, but of a literature manufactured in a library. It is a veritable Crystal Palace of an epic. Whatever difference of opinion there may be as regards the merits of this book, one thing is

certain, that the experiment has never been repeated in Bengal.

Bengal, under the East India Company, failed to produce anything which can be called literature. The object of all writing in this age was pedagogic, and not artistic. It was not only the age of experiments, but also of reformation, in the literal sense of the term. Our fathers strove to reform everything—our religion, our society, our language, our education. Bengal produced in the last century a man of colossal intellect and marvellous clairvoyance,—Rajah Ram Mohan Roy,—who embodied in himself all these various reforming activities. British India up to now has not produced a greater mind, and he remains for all time the supreme representative of the spirit of the new age and the genius of our ancient land. He looked at European civilisation from the pinnacle of Indian culture, and saw and welcomed all that was living and life-giving in it. It may be said of him, that he was the originator of our modern literature, because he was the father of Bengalee prose. The great gift of the last age to us, has been that of a new psychology and a new medium of expression.

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Bengal's period of literary apprenticeship came to an end with the close of the first century of British rule. And the re-birth of our literature was synchronous with the assumption of the Government of India by the Crown. Our modern literature is

too near us to be treated historically. Through lack of a proper perspective, we cannot see the literary products of the present age in their right proportion and true character. Then we are too much interested in the current literary activities, to view them from an impersonal standpoint,—we who are engaged in fighting some tendencies in our literature and supporting others. So I shall content myself with bringing out the psychology at the root of the present-day literature. It is universally admitted that modern Bengal has produced only two writers of undoubted genius;—Bunkim Chunder the novelist, and Rabindranath the poet. It is obvious from their works that their psychology has been profoundly modified by Western thought and Western feeling, and yet retained its Indian character. In them the East and the West have met. Modern Bengalee literature is born of the contact of these two different cultures, and represents in varying degrees and shades their conflict and union. We in Bengal live under the shadow of the Himalayas, with the breath of the sea in our nostrils. Mentally also, we live in a similar land. At our back stands the ancient culture of India, in all its lofty and static grandeur ; and in our front lies the wide expanse of European culture with all its inward depth and all its outward restlessness. Both have an equal fascination for us, and we can no more deny our past than refuse to recognise the present. So our God-given task is to synthetise in our life and in our literature, these two divergent and supreme manifestations of the

human spirit. Whether we shall ever succeed in doing so, only the future can tell. But this much is certain, that our literature and our life will have significance and vitality, to the extent that they represent and reflect the endeavour to bring about this synthesis.



